



**VARIOLOGIES**

**PATREON-EXCLUSIVE BIBLE STUDY**

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**UNDERSTANDING SATAN**

**Is Satan a Heavenly Being,  
a Human Adversary,  
or Poetic Personification?**

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## • **SATAN IN SECULAR ART**

Over the years, the Devil has been portrayed in various ways in secular art. In recent times, he appears in songs like “Sympathy for the Devil” by the Rolling Stones, movies such as Al Pacino’s role in *The Devil’s Advocate*, and TV shows like *Lucifer*, based on Vertigo comics. Looking further back, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* depicts Satan as a tragic hero fighting against God, while Dante’s *Inferno* portrays him as a monstrous figure with three faces and wings, trapped in ice at Hell’s core. Commonly, people imagine Satan as a red, horned creature with a tail and pitchfork, ruling over Hell amidst flames. However, all these depictions are products of human imagination from times after the biblical writings.

## • **STUDYING SATAN**

What does the Bible really say about Satan or the Devil? This is a significant biblical topic, yet it’s often misunderstood. In this study, I aim to clarify and deepen our understanding of this subject, providing new insights along the way. For what purpose? To help us grasp what Jesus achieved by defeating the Devil, and how this knowledge empowers us to live victoriously over Satan’s influence.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8; James 4:7

## • DEFINITION OF TERMS

You may have noticed that I've used the terms "Satan" and "Devil" interchangeably. The Bible uses both to refer to the same entity, as they are simply different descriptive terms. For instance, consider how the Synoptic Gospels recount Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Matthew said:

**“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” (Matthew 4:1, NASB)**

In the temptation narrative, Matthew (and Luke) used the term “devil.”<sup>2</sup> However, in Mark's version, he said:

**“And [Jesus] was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan...” (Mark 1:13, NASB)**

In recounting the same event of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, Matthew and Luke refer to the tempter as “the devil,” while Mark uses the term “Satan.” Therefore, it seems appropriate to use these terms interchangeably. But what do these terms mean?

**SATAN** = Hebrew “*satan*” = “adversary”

**DEVIL** = Greek “*diabolos*” = “accuser”

These words do not carry any inherent deeper meaning on their own. They are simply the Hebrew and Greek terms for “adversary” and “accuser,” respectively. For example, Paul said to Timothy, speaking about women who are deacons, that they “...**must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.**” (1 Timothy 3:11, NASB). The word translated here as “malicious gossips” is “*diabolos*.” The women referenced here were not “devils” in any supernatural sense, but rather they were falsely accusing others. Therefore, the labels “*satan*” or “*diabolos*” can be used for any individual or object that serves as an accuser or adversary of God's people.

However, most of the time, when we talk about Satan or the Devil, an ultimate adversary or an ultimate accuser of God and His people is meant and will be the focus of this study.

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Luke 4:1-2

## • CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF SATAN

All Christians agree that the Bible contains references to Satan or the Devil, the ultimate adversary or accuser of God's people. However, as with any biblical topic, there are differing opinions as to the nature of Satan.

### • THE MAINSTREAM VIEW

The mainstream Christian view is that Satan is a literal heavenly being who has rebelled against God and tempts God's people to sin against Him. Proponents of this view often cite the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness to argue that Satan is a real entity who influences human minds but remains distinct from them.

In Matthew's version of the temptation narrative, the Devil is depicted as coming up to Jesus and speaking with him. It says, **"And the tempter came and said to him..." (Matthew 4:3, NASB)**. Later, after Jesus successfully rebukes the Devil, it says, **"Then the devil left him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to him." (Matthew 4:11, NASB)**. From this passage, it is reasoned that since the same language is used of the Devil as was used of angels, and no one disputes that real angelic beings came into contact with Jesus, it can be concluded that the Devil is a real personal being as well.

**THE MAINSTREAM CHRISTIAN VIEW OF SATAN:** Most Christians assume that there is a heavenly being bearing the title "Satan" or "the Devil," and that he is an external force outside of humanity, constantly seeking to influence people to sin against God.

### • A MINORITY VIEW

A minority opinion among Christians holds that Satan is not a heavenly personal being but rather a poetic personification of our human inclination toward sin and evil actions. According to this view, passages that refer to Satan or the Devil can be seen as describing internal struggles with sin or even as personifications of external adversaries. This interpretation is supported by various scriptures that highlight the internal nature of sin.

For instance, Jesus taught that sin originates from within us: **"...from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts..." (Mark 7:21, NASB)**. Similarly, Paul, in Romans, attributes his wrong choices to the "sin" dwelling within him, writing, **"But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me" (Romans 7:20, NASB)**. This inclination toward sin is often depicted in Scripture as if it were an external force. For example, in Genesis, God personified Cain's sinful desire as a predatory animal: **"...if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7, NASB)**.

In light of such personifications in the Bible (like wisdom in Proverbs 8), proponents of this view argue that references to Satan or the Devil could also be personifications. When Peter said, “...**Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour**” (1 Peter 5:8, NASB), it could be understood as referring to the sinful inclination within us, constantly pushing us toward sin, much like a predatory animal instinctively seeks its prey.

Additionally, those who hold this view believe that Satan or the Devil may be used metaphorically to describe human adversaries of God and His people. For example, Duncan Heaster suggests that in the temptation of Jesus, the Devil could symbolize both the temptations within Jesus' own mind and the pressure from his fellow Jews to reveal himself as the conquering Messiah, which was not yet part of God's plan.<sup>3</sup> Alan Hayward similarly proposes that Peter's reference to the Devil in 1 Peter 5:8 could be describing "cruel rulers of the Roman Empire," human adversaries who oppressed the early Christians.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, as illustrated in the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the book of Acts, this interpretation aligns with the idea that Satan personifies human inclination toward sin. When Peter confronted Ananias, he asked, “**Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? ... Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart?**” (Acts 5:3-4, NASB). In this instance, Satan and Ananias' own deceitful heart are spoken of in tandem, suggesting that “Satan” here may represent the internal motivation to lie.

**A MINORITY CHRISTIAN VIEW OF SATAN:** There is a minority opinion among Christians that Satan is not a heavenly personal being but rather a poetic personification of human inclination toward sin and evil, as seen in various scriptural references that attribute sinful motives to internal human tendencies rather than an external supernatural entity.

## • WHICH IS RIGHT?

Having examined both the mainstream and minority views on the nature of Satan, we see a clear divergence in understanding. The mainstream perspective views Satan as a literal being with distinct influence, while the minority perspective considers Satan a personification of human inclination toward sin. Both interpretations offer compelling arguments supported by Scripture. Rather than attempting to come to a conclusion right now, to explore this further, let's examine each relevant biblical text about Satan or the Devil.

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<sup>3</sup> Heaster, Duncan. *The Real Devil: A Biblical Exploration*. Saint Lucia: Carelinks Publishing, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Hayward. *The Real Devil*. [www.god-so-loved-the-world.org](http://www.god-so-loved-the-world.org). Retrieved 13 June 2024.